

INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 11, 1981

INTERVIEWEES: CAMERON AND LUCILLE McELROY

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: The McElroys' residence, Marshall, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. McElroy, I was going to ask you if you ever knew Mrs. Johnson's mother.

M: Yes, I knew her very well. I sold her the first Liberty Bond she ever bought. I walked up to her [inaudible] car and told her who I was, and she recognized the name, and he ended up by buying a hundred dollar bond and paid me for it in cash right then.

G: What was she like?

M: She was a real intelligent woman. Very intelligent. Cultured, yes, she was cultured. Yes, and one of the nicest persons you ever met, but she wouldn't go out of her way to meet you or anything.

G: Did she fit in in Karnack very well?

M: I knew two friends that she had there. That is Dorris and Hugh Powell. Hugh's dead and Dorris is gone somewhere for an operation. But they were quite young then. And she knew them, Mrs. Taylor, of course, knew [them].

G: Minnie Lee was her name, wasn't it?

M: Yes, yes.

G: I have the impression that she was very different from a lot of people, that she was sort of a suffragette.

McElroy -- I -- 2

M: She was different, but a good difference.

G: Can you elaborate? Can you tell me how she was different?

M: Well, in elections and things like that, Mr. Taylor would be all going for somebody, one man down there, and she would be for the other man. That kind of thing.

G: I have seen one of her letters, and she seemed to be very assertive.

M: Yes, she was.

LM: She was an independent person, and she had her own mind made up about things and, as you say, she was hard to change. But she was usually right. She had very high ideals and was a little aloof from the community down there, but as Cameron says, she was intellectually superior to most of them, and they had so little in common that way.

G: Well, was she interested in opera and literature and music?

LM: Music, yes. I don't know about the opera.

M: Literature, yes.

LM: Literature. She had quite a collection of Browning, I believe it was, and a marvelous library. And she read a great deal.

I remember that she wore this large hat with a veil and her carriage was excellent. She was a handsome woman, erect. This is my impression, and I was a child.

G: Why did she wear veils?

LM: I don't know. It was the kind that went over the top of the hat and tied. Now that was the only time I ever saw her, but it was my impression, and I thought, well, she is a real lady.

M: She'd be in a Ford sedan and have a chauffeur.

McElroy -- I -- 3

G: A chauffeur?

M: That really got me. You remember that? But she was a good person. A lot of people didn't like her because she was aloof and a little strange, but I thought she was a fine woman. Very brilliant woman.

G: I hear she was interested in health remedies, Dr. Kellogg and things like that. Do you recall?

M: No, I wouldn't have a way of knowing about that.

G: She did send her sons away to school. Was that unusual?

M: Yes. Tony and Tommy.

LM: Yes. We knew both of the boys very well. But I didn't know that-- when they were growing up, I didn't know them.

M: I knew them after they were grown up. Tommy was in the wholesale grocery business in Jefferson, and Tony was in college.

LM: You know, in those days the people of Marshall and Karnack were not as closely related as they are today because the roads were bad and to go to Karnack was quite a trip, and we didn't have the automobiles that we have today. So it was two separate communities really and today they're more or less one. We all meet regularly and we know the people there so much better than in those days.

G: I have seen one letter that Minnie Lee wrote in which she was sponsoring some quail saving society. She believed that it was important to preserve quails. Do you know anything about that?

M: Yes, I know quite a bit about it. I got her to do that. And she got interested in it. They had thirty-five, forty thousand acres of land down there. It was all great quail land. And I went to Mr. Taylor

McElroy -- I -- 4

and he told me to see Mrs. Taylor. So I went up to the house to see her.

LM: Cameron said she went all out for it. That was rather typical of her, as I understand it. When she was interested in something, she was sincere and devout about carrying it out.

G: What did she do?

M: Well, she posted all that land and she just let a few of us go in there and hunt on it when it was time to trim some of the coveys down at the end of the season.

G: Why did she want to preserve the quail? Did she feel--?

M: Because they were native to the habitat around here.

G: Did they eat the insects, too? Or was it something--?

M: I understand they ate enough insects to have effect. They ate the insects and other foods, too.

G: Did she campaign against Cousin Bob Hope--was that his name?

M: Yes. That was Carl Hope's younger brother. You remember him, don't you? He ran for commissioner, didn't he?

LM: I don't recall, Cameron. That was before I was interested in politics.

M: He ran for commissioner, and everybody thought he would sweep Karnack, but he didn't.

LM: Why was Mrs. Taylor opposed to him?

M: I never even knew. She took a stand when he started changing. I wasn't particularly for him anyhow.

G: Was that when she accused him of being a slacker?

McElroy -- I -- 5

- M: I never did know about that. I refuse to get in those.
- G: Another letter seemed to indicate that she was active in agricultural decisions, telling Mr. Taylor when to sell his crop or when not to or what price to sell it for.
- M: Well, we handled all his cotton. We owned the Marshall Compress Company, and it was a big industry. We shipped all his cotton up to us and sold it out [when] he thought the market was right and wrong. Of course, cotton went down to a nickel a pound one year. That was disastrous. We had a big crop [so we] went ahead and we made the best of it.
- G: But was she active in helping to make the decisions for him?
- M: I don't think she was too active. He could think pretty well for himself. Lyndon told me about he and Mr. Taylor [were] going back to Shreveport one day. Said Mr. Taylor loaned fifty-five hundred dollars going down in the car to somebody, coming back he loaned seventy-five hundred dollars. What he was doing was telling how Mr. Taylor made his money.
- G: Did Minnie Lee go away during the summer to places, Alabama or Chicago or New York?
- M: No. I never did know of her going to them. But I knew of her going to Alabama. I think she was originally from there.
- (Interruption)
- G: Now, Mr. McElroy, you were talking about the effect that posting the land had, that after she--

McElroy -- I -- 6

M: She was a leader in that, and the white landowners followed her. The Negro landowners did not. Even today a fifty-five hundred acre tract down there all under one fence.

G: Is that right? I gather Minnie Lee went to Dr. Kellogg's health facility in Battle Creek, Michigan. Do you remember that?

M: I don't recall that.

G: She was a Methodist, is that right?

M: Yes, I always understood that.

G: Do you recall her relationship with the people who worked for Mr. Taylor? Did she get along with them?

M: I don't think she made any effort to.

G: Really? Some people have suggested that she was high-strung and nervous.

M: I never did see that. However I wasn't with her that much.

G: Was she sick a lot? Or was she healthy?

M: No. I don't know.

G: She had a chauffeur named Ransom Howe, is that right?

M: Yes.

G: What was he like?

M: I just knew him as the chauffeur, that's all.

G: Tell me about Mr. Taylor.

M: Mr. Taylor was a very peculiar man. Everybody called him Cap. And he would run his cotton farm and all that, but you never heard a word from him.

G: Was he quiet? Was he naturally quiet?

McElroy -- I -- 7

M: I don't know. He never did communicate with me. We were good friends.

LM: He produced more cotton than anybody in that area down there.

M: Yes.

LM: And had so many people working for him.

M: Tenants working for him.

LM: He was a great influence in that community.

G: Was he?

M: Well, he was an influence in Karnack and Leigh. Leigh community. The Taylor and Howard Store was over in Leigh, and the gin was over there, and T. J. Taylor [Store] was at Karnack.

G: How did he market his cotton?

M: He would accumulate a hundred bales. And then if he thought the market was right, he'd sell it.

G: Did he process it through your plant?

M: Yes. We stored it for him, and then shipped it out to whoever he sold it to.

G: Was he active in other aspects of the community?

M: Hugh Powell was the most active man down there. But really T. J. Taylor was the most influential man in Karnack. He had more money than anybody.

G: Was he interested in Caddo Lake?

M: Well, he sold fish out of Caddo Lake for years and years. Sometimes when it was against the law.

G: Really? Why was it against the law?

M: Well, to sell game fish.

McElroy -- I -- 8

G: Oh, I see.

M: They'd run nets. Wouldn't catch them on a hook and line. Run nets.

G: There was some indication that he marketed his fish at Fulton's Fish Market in New York.

M: That was possible, but I wouldn't know about that.

G: What about politics? Was he active in politics?

M: I don't know. Whenever something came up in politics, my father or myself would go down there and talk with him. He'd agree with us.

G: The Ku Klux Klan was very active in Marshall in the early part of the century, weren't they?

M: Yes, but a lot of people didn't adhere to it.

G: Do you recall his attitude toward the Klan?

M: My idea--I don't know this for a fact--is that he was opposed to the Klan.

G: Tell me about his store.

M: Well, he'd deal in everything.

LM: It was the center gathering place for the people of the community, I understand. Didn't you always say that, Cameron?

M: Oh, yes. The Negroes, especially. But it was.

G: Did he make money out of his store or was it primarily the money he made from his cotton production? Where did he make his money?

M: I think cotton production. To begin with, he had the gin to gin it. And he had the means to purchase it from his tenants. And when he accumulated some, he'd sell it.

G: I see.

McElroy -- I -- 9

M: Yes, he was a reasonable. . . .

G: Was he able to buy more land as he went along?

M: Yes. Goodness, he had sixty-five thousand acres at one time.

G: Was he a supporter of the Methodist Church there, do you know?

M: I don't know. We never got into church affairs in our discussions.

G: Now he was from Alabama, too, wasn't he?

M: I always understood that, but I never was told that.

G: He was a large man, wasn't he?

M: Large, yes.

G: Can you tell me anything about him?

M: Well, he was a ladies' man.

G: Was he?

M: And he didn't care who knew it.

G: Well, his wife died, I guess about 1918?

M: Somewhere around 1918 to 1920.

G: Did you go to the funeral?

M: Yes, I think my father and myself went to the funeral.

G: Then he didn't marry again for a number of years, is that right?

M: I'm not going to say a number of years, but he did [remarry].

G: Do you recall Aunt Effie? Effie Pattillo?

M: I don't place her.

G: She was Mrs. Taylor's sister, Mrs. Johnson's aunt from Alabama.

He didn't travel much. Mr. Taylor didn't seem to travel much.

M: No. Marshall and Shreveport were about the only places he went.

G: Did he have any other interests or hobbies?

McElroy -- I -- 10

M: Just those farms.

G: Did you ever go out to the Brick House, see his home?

M: Yes.

G: Tell me about the house.

M: Well, it was a big house. You know where it now stands, big house.

When he died, we went to the funeral down there, and saw Lady Bird and Lyndon there and that's where we put Lyndon on an airplane down there in a field.

G: That was 1960, I guess.

M: Yes.

G: Well, Mr. Taylor was a director of the Rogers State Bank, I understand.

M: That was Jefferson. Jefferson had seven banks at one time.

G: Was there a rivalry between Marshall and Jefferson then, really?

M: No. You ever know of any rivalry?

LM: I think that was before we came along.

G: Did Mr. Taylor know Homer Price, the publisher of. . . ?

M: I'm sure he did. I'm sure he did.

G: Now Mr. Price was a prohibitionist, wasn't he?

M: Yes.

G: Was Mr. Taylor a prohibitionist?

M: No, sir. Neither were the McElroys either.

G: Is that right? Can you elaborate on that?

M: Well, as long as I can remember in our home--

McElroy -- I -- 11

LM: No, darling, Mr. Taylor. Can you elaborate on Mr. Taylor's not being a prohibitionist?

M: I am. Mr. Taylor, I'm sure, had his own whiskey made during prohibition because we all had to buy it from local manufacturers called bootleggers.

G: Moonshine, I guess. So he made it himself?

M: To the best of my knowledge.

G: There's been some indication that he provided benefits to his workers during the Depression. When others were out of work, that he would hire them on.

M: That's right. He was awful good to his tenants.

G: Really? But did he pay them enough to earn money?

M: He paid them two or three dollars a day. That was as much as anybody paid them.

G: Which one of the sons was more like Captain Taylor?

M: I think the oldest son, Tommy. He's dead now. I never did know Tony real well. He lives out in New Mexico.

G: Did you know Mrs. Johnson when she was growing up in Karnack?

M: Yes, just scarce. Very passing acquaintance.

G: What was she like?

M: I thought she was real nice. She went to high school, I recall, in Jefferson.

LM: She went to the Marshall high school part of the time. She was very pretty.

G: Do you recall the first time you met Lyndon Johnson?

McElroy -- I -- 12

M: I believe it was in Austin, as well as I can recall.

G: Did you know him when he was NYA director?

M: Yes. I think he was in Austin when I first met him.

G: Did you have any association with NYA projects during the Depression?

M: No. No.

LM: Cameron and Lyndon had the same birthday and they always got in touch with one another on--

M: August 27.

We used to go down to Kerrville to take our son down there to a camp, and we would go down to the town he was born in.

G: Can you tell me about his association with Wright Patman?

M: Mr. Patman supported Lyndon in everything he went into. I remember once we were in the Baker Hotel [in Dallas], a few of us fellows, when Lyndon was running for the Senate, just before then, and he heard that Wright Patman was not going to run [for the Senate]. He phoned me in that room and I was there, and Patman was sitting across the table from us and [Lyndon] didn't know it. And he was very thankful when he got out of the race, Patman.

G: In 1941 Wright Patman was thinking about running for the U.S. Senate and word has it that President Roosevelt talked him out of running so that Lyndon could run.

M: I don't think it was quite that way. I made the point with Patman that he had a good district to represent and he could be just as strong as a senator, maybe stronger as a congressman than he could as a senator. He told me at the Baker Hotel, "I won't run."

McElroy -- I -- 13

G: He said he wouldn't run against--?

M: Against Johnson.

G: Now after Lyndon Johnson's election to Congress in 1937, when he was recovering from an operation, he came to Karnack and spent about ten days there, and Wright Patman and either you or your father went out and visited with him.

M: My father went.

G: Your father went. Do you recall that visit? Did your father tell you about it?

M: Yes. Just took a normal visit.

G: Did you support Lyndon Johnson in his 1941 race when he ran against W. Lee O'Daniel?

M: I supported Lyndon Johnson every time he ran.

G: Did you? He seems to have had a hard time in East Texas. He didn't run well in East Texas.

M: That's true.

G: Why was that?

M: I never knew, but we did everything we could to support him and we did carry this county.

G: Did Jim Ferguson oppose him in 1941?

M: No, I don't remember. I don't recall that.

G: Did Carl Estes support him in those elections?

M: Carl Estes always told me he supported him.

LM: His paper. Did his paper support him?

M: Entirely, yes.

McElroy -- I -- 14

G: But did Carl Estes actually support him? Do you know?

M: I don't think he supported him very hard.

G: Really? Well, did T. J. Taylor help Lyndon Johnson in this area?

M: Yes, he gave him money all the time.

G: Did he? But would people support him because he was T. J. Taylor's son-in-law? Would that help him?

M: No.

G: Really? Well, who were his organizers in Harrison County? Who were his leaders? You? And who else? Did you have any help?

M: Well, my father and some other of our friends.

G: Did you go to Austin and work with the campaign organization or how did you--?

M: I went down there two or three times. But our politics are so different than the regular run of politics.

G: How so?

M: Harrison County. We knew we could carry our county.

LM: How is it different?

M: I'm telling you how. I'm getting ready to tell you. It's different because they depended on one man to carry him. That was my father. He was for Lyndon all the time.

G: What was the source of your father's influence?

LM: His character, mainly. He was vitally interested in the community and because of that he had influence.

G: But everyone knew him, I assume.

LM: Yes.

McElroy -- I -- 15

G: How did they, because of his cotton business?

M: Yes.

LM: Well, and he was very active in all civic activities and projects.

G: Was there a social difference between Marshall and Karnack?

M: I don't know of any.

LM: I don't know if you'd say it was a social difference, but as I told you a minute ago, we didn't relate as much as we do today, but I think it was because of the lack of transportation and so forth. But Karnack was more of a center and Marshall, and we just didn't relate with one another because of the transportation problem.

G: Did you ever visit LBJ in Washington?

M: Many times, at his office and his home.

G: Can you recall your discussions during these visits?

M: At home it was always just pleasure, but at his office we talked business.

G: Was he helpful in getting things for the district?

M: Yes.

G: Can you recall any particular project that he helped secure for Marshall or Harrison County?

M: Well, he gave Patman a tremendous amount of help on the steel mill at Daingerfield [Morris County]. One other project, yes, I got credit for that but I did some things on it, the Longhorn Ordnance Works at Karnack.

G: Can you recall the story of that, how it evolved?

McElroy -- I -- 16

M: I got all the credit for getting it, because I went to Washington several times on it. But Patman and Johnson were the main reasons I got it.

G: How did they help?

M: Just through influence.

G: Do you recall who they talked to?

M: I don't recall.

G: Whose idea was it to locate the ordnance plant in Karnack?

M: It was after they located the plant at Texarkana. They located two plants at Texarkana, and we moved in for our share. I made several trips to Washington.

G: Do you recall whom you met with?

M: Patman and myself went one day to see the War Department at the Pentagon on this. Who the men were we talked to, I can't think of it now. We talked and talked and gave our reasons for it, there was plenty of labor here and all that.

G: That was on Mr. Taylor's land, wasn't it?

M: Part of it was on his land. Part of it was on Hugh Powell's land.

G: I see. What did they do, lease the land or did they sell it?

M: They bought it, paid top price for it, which was about twenty-two dollars an acre, and with an understanding that if the plant would ever close down, done away with, they would offer it back first to the people that had owned it.

G: And it did revert to the--I mean they did sell it after the war, didn't they? Oh, they didn't?

McElroy -- I -- 17

M: They're still operating.

G: Is that right? Any other projects?

LM: The Thiokol plant.

M: That's the same thing, Longhorn Ordnance Works.

G: Coke Stevenson had a lot of support in East Texas, didn't he, in 1948?

M: Yes. We were for Johnson, and I'm trying to think who the biggest were for Coke Stevenson. But he went out fast. He went out everywhere. We carried the county for Lyndon, and then after that, he never could come back.

G: Did you see the helicopter in the 1948 campaign?

M: I think I did.

LM: I don't know.

G: Was it effective as a campaign [technique]?

M: No.

G: It wasn't? Why not?

M: It was too new for the damn people.

G: Really?

M: And of course, 50 per cent of Harrison County was black. You had a terrible time making them vote.

G: How did he get the blacks to vote for him?

M: People like my father and myself in this county, we went out and got them.

G: Did you pay the ministers or what?

M: We paid the leaders.

McElroy -- I -- 18

G: How did you prevent the opposition from doing the same thing?

M: They just weren't as smart as we were. And then, too, we had a few of the Negro leaders right hand-in-hand with us.

G: Anything else on those campaigns that you feel is important?

M: There are several important things. I can't think of anything that would be of interest right at this time.

G: Can you think of anything else on those campaigns?

LM: No, but I know he hasn't given you all the information that he can, but I hope he can write it down and send it to you.

G: Oh, that'd be fine.

LM: Have time to get his thoughts together. Anything as important as that, as much time as was spent on it, why, I'm sure he could contribute more to it.

G: Sure. Any other trips to Washington that you recall?

M: We lived up there at the Mayflower for several months.

LM: But Cameron was back and forth to Washington quite a lot with Longhorn and various things here in the community that needed to be done. He would go to Washington to see Mr. Patman or Lyndon. They would put him in touch with the people he needed to see. They were certainly good to Marshall, both of them, always ready to help.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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